

Years ago at a neighborhood *trattoria* in Boston's north end, I took my first sip of grappa. I can still recall its bite, a burning aftertaste, like drinking fire. I was certain I'd never go near the stuff again. In those days, dining Italian style meant house Chianti, clams casino, pasta smothered in tomato sauce and grated cheese. A glass of good grappa was hard to come by.

Now celebrated chefs like Lidia Bastianich have transformed Italian American food into haute cuisine, and grappa is a top-shelf beverage. At Felidia, her award-winning Manhattan restaurant, Bastianich offers a selection of 23 grappas, many from well-known Italian producers such as Jacopo Poli, Nonino and Ceretto. She also features several smaller producers such as Coppo, whose Grappa Pomorosso from Barbera grapes is stellar.

# In the Spirit of Grappa

By Michele Micalizzi McCarthy



Felidia's grappa list is divided into two sections: *grappa barricato* that has been aged in small oak barrels and *grappa normale* that has not. Mark Du Mez, sommelier, often recommends the barricato grappas; many resemble honey or peach tea in color, whereas *normale* versions are clear. Wood also imparts additional flavors and enhances the texture, creating a rounder, creamier, more luxurious grappa, he says. Diners can also choose from Felidia's own house-made infusions including cherry, fig, apricot and raisin. The infused grappa is ladled into a glass with some of the spirit-soaked fruit, which softens the grappa's feisty flavor, making it more palatable to the novice.

What accounts for this new American taste for grappa?

"The love affair this country has with Italy," says Leonardo LoCascio, CEO and President of Winebow, one of the most influential importers of Italian wine in the United States. "If you go to Italy, you'll get a glass of grappa at the end of your meal. Americans come home, and they want to

recreate the entire experience. They order grappa."

Du Mez agrees. "At our restaurant, it's common for people to order a glass of grappa after their meal. They feel grappa is part of the whole Italian dining experience."

Although grappa is a common *digestivo* or after dinner drink throughout Italy, it wasn't always the sophisticated spirit of connoisseurs. The clear grape brandy originated among the poor in the Veneto and Friuli regions of the north where it was a by-product of the winemaking process. After the grapes were first pressed to make wine for the wealthy landowners, the solids that remained—skin, pulp and grape seeds—were left for the peasants who ingeniously fermented and distilled this grape *pomace* into the fiery beverage we call grappa. People drank grappa to keep warm during the long, cold winters. They also used it as a potent painkiller and cure-all.

"The use of grappa *pomace* developed from the typical rural spirit of hard work and an effort to



**FAMILY SPIRIT** Jacopo Poli checking one of his grappas.

thoroughly master the primary goods nature affords,” says Jacopo Poli, whose family has been distilling grappa in the Veneto region for four generations.

Jacopo’s great-grandfather supported his family by making straw hats. He also built an illegal still on a cart and, like many traveling distillers in his day, went from town to town distilling grape *pomace* in exchange for some of the grappa he produced. Jacopo’s grandfather constructed his own still using a train engine. In 1898, his business became official, and the Poli family has been distilling fine grappa ever since.

The Poli family’s dedication to the history and culture of grappa distillation led to the creation of a grappa museum housed in a beautifully restored, 15th century palace near Andrea Palladio’s wooden bridge in Bassano del Grappa.

Over the years, as the technology of distillation improved and Italy’s population grew increasingly affluent, some distillers began creating a more refined grappa from high-quality, single-vineyard grapes. In 1973, the Nonino family, grappa producers for more than a century, distilled the first single-grape grappa from the Picolit grape. Their Grappa Nonino Cru Monovitigno Picolit was a stunning success, and other producers soon followed their lead. Single-varietal or *monovitigno* grappas have a distinct, yet subtle flavor unique to the individual grape that is distilled. Among the most highly acclaimed single-varietals is Po Moscato di Poli, an extremely elegant and highly aromatic grappa.

“There’s no mistake when you sip Poli Moscato. It’s like diving into the grape,” says LoCascio.

Today, grappa is no longer produced exclusively in the north; it can be found throughout Italy, almost anywhere wine is made. But all grappa is not created equal. The difference between mass-produced, commercial grappa and exquisite small batch production, such as Jacopo Poli’s, begins with the quality of the raw materials. Poli selects only the best fresh fruit, which is then lightly pressed in a traditional pot still during the grape harvest from September through November.

“The new wave of grappa tends to be less aggressive, shows more fruit and is altogether more elegant on the palate,” says LoCascio. “The grappas of Jacopo Poli embody this newfound elegance. Poli may have, in fact, defined it.”

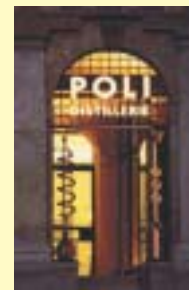
Grappa is best served cool, but not cold in small tulip-shaped tasting glasses with long stems so that the spirit is not warmed by touch. It should be gently swirled in the glass, and slowly sipped. As the alcohol evaporates, the grappa’s flavor comes back into the mouth.

Today, fine grappa is a luxury product, and that luxury is often reflected in the high price tag and exquisite hand-blown glass bottles that many top producers use to market their sophisticated products. It’s all part of grappa’s new glamour. ■ ■

### Fine Grappas for Sipping

In 1998, Robert Parker named Leonardo LoCascio “one of the most influential wine personalities of the last 20 years.” The following is a list of the grappas he imports from Italy. Those with an asterisk are LoCascio’s personal favorites.

Allegrini Grappa di Amarone\*\*\*  
Altesino Grappa di Altesino  
Castellare  
Coppo Grappa di Pomorosso\*\*\*  
Nardini Bianca  
Nardini Mandorla (Almond Flavored)\*\*\*  
Nardini Riserva  
Nardini Ruta (Herb Infused)  
Tauri Grappa dei Messapi  
Zardetto Grappa di Prosecco\*\*\*  
Zenato Grappa di Amarone\*\*\*  
Poli Cabernet  
Poli Tocai\*\*\*  
Poli Moscato\*\*\*  
Poli Torcolato\*\*\*  
Poli Vespaioia\*\*\*  
Po`di Poli Merlot  
Po`di Poli Pinot  
Po`di Poli Traminer\*\*\*  
Poli Sarpa



For more information on the history and culture of grappa distillation, visit: [www.POLIGRAPPA.COM](http://www.POLIGRAPPA.COM)